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Stephen Mix Mitchell Highboy

The Stephen Mix Mitchell highboy was received in August 1941 as a bequest from Lucy Pratt Mitchell, great-great-granddaughter of the first owner. It has been twice restored in a manner ill-suited to this type of piece. Through the generous interest of Newton C. Brainard, one of our Vice-Presidents, we were able, so far as it is now possible, to return the highboy to its original condition.

In restoration we have had the benefit of an early photograph, reproduced in the 1913 and the 1924 editions of Luke Vincent Lockwood's *Colonial Furniture in America,* and a photograph of the piece as we received it. The first photograph shows no drops, the key rims are plainly visible and wooden knobs had been substituted for the original brasses. When received, the highboy had reproduction brasses in what to us was bad taste. They were poorly made and the edges were not beveled. There were also escutcheons which should not have been there and the key holes on the bottom side drawers had been blocked, apparently to keep an escutcheon and pull from being on top of one another.

The construction itself is very unusual. The mortise and tenon joints on the lower section are pegged from the inside and the bearing rail and division strips are dovetailed and housed. The top rail is dovetailed into both the leg and the end board, while the low center runners are similarly joined and housed into the apron. The drawers are dovetailed with large acute angle members. The back is applied in a reverse manner. Some of the drawer bottoms are rabbeted, others are chamfered. Dovetailing is again used to put together the carcass of the upper chest. The bearing rails have parallel members running with the backboard and these are dovetailed into the ends both from the front and rear. The runners connect them with mortise and tenon joints, forming a frame of the strongest construction. Often one drawer is constructed in this manner, but rarely all the drawers.

In general the style is of no particular school but contains elements of originality. The arches on the bottom are Queen Anne, or perhaps as early as William and Mary. They are very nice and serve to date the piece as a bit earlier than 1760. The ball and claw feet are Chippendale. The carving is good but the modelling poor, suggesting little familiarity with this type. The other carving, the scales on the knees, the symmetrical shell with doubled scalloped edges and scales on the lower edge, the woven reed design near the top of the stile and the rosettes with scales, are finely done but crude in design. The idea is there and the skill is present, but the refinement of both idea and skill is lacking.

The two side finials are original. The center finial and drops were supplied in keeping with the feel of the piece. The original iron locks still remain in all the drawers.

The cornice mouldings are particularly interesting. They consist of a quarter round, a fillet, a cyma recta, a fillet, a large cove, an astragal, a fillet, and a small cove. This same arrangement, in a more porportioned form, appears on a highboy made by John Goddard.

The stiles with their cut fret design are the most unusual feature of the Mitchell highboy. From the back they have been hollowed out. The green paint of the back strip of the fretwork is original though it was not discovered until this restoration. Previously they had been reversed with the paint hidden from view. Now we are able to remove these strips from the top for examination. We know of no other example of this treatment. The green blends well with the linseed oil and shellac finish.

The wood is cherry for the visible parts. Pine was used on the back of the lower section, for the hood, the top and bottom of the upper section and the bottom of the drawers and backing of the stiles. The upper back and backs of drawers are basswood, while oak is used for the runners and drawer sides.

There is much evidence in this highboy that warrants future study and examination of pieces bearing similar details. We do not know the maker but believe him to be from Connecticut. The construction suggests a skilled carpenter, for few cabinetmakers would spend so much time on hidden points which, from a structural point of view, hardly warranted such careful and thorough treatment.

There are many good ideas in design and ornaments, suggesting some familiarity with the leaders of the time but lacking refinement achieved through frequent use. We have already noted one similarity with John Goddard of Newport. Benjamin Burnham's pieces also have some similarities. Whoever the maker, he was good, and he produced a fine highboy. We can only hope he will be identified, other products of his skill traced, and his proper place in Connecticut's furniture makers established.

Foster W. Rice, of Rowayton, gave a talk at the October meeting on "The Jocelyns, Painters and Engravers". The speaker, a great-grandson of Nathaniel Jocelyn, showed many examples of his work and that of his brother, Simeon Smith Jocelyn, the engraver. He also described his efforts to locate portraits by Nathaniel Jocelyn which had proven surprisingly successful. The Society does not own a painting by Jocelyn and, as indicated previously, he is one Connecticut artist we are anxious to secure a specimen by for preservation. We urge anyone owning such a portrait to give due consideration to this request.

At the November meeting, Henry Cave, of Hartford, spoke on the beginnings of the automobile industry in Hartford. The fiftieth anniversary of this event was celebrated during September with appropriate ceremonies. The speaker was early associated with Hartford concerns manufacturing automobiles. He stressed the fact that actual production of automobiles in America began in Hartford.

An extremely interesting talk on "Personalizing United States History through our Presidents", was given at the December meeting by John Marshall Holcombe of Farmington. Mr. Holcombe, a well known collector of United States historical letters and documents, illustrated his talk with examples from his collection.

THE EAST HADDAM MEETINGHOUSE

Who designed it?

CONTRIBUTED BY NEWTON C. BRAINARD

For many years the tradition has been generally accepted that Spratt, an English architect, designed the East Haddam meetinghouse. The church records contained no reference to him and the tradition appears to have been based entirely on the fact that he was building the Champion house at East Haddam landing at about that time. Since no other name was suggested, who but Spratt could have been the architect?

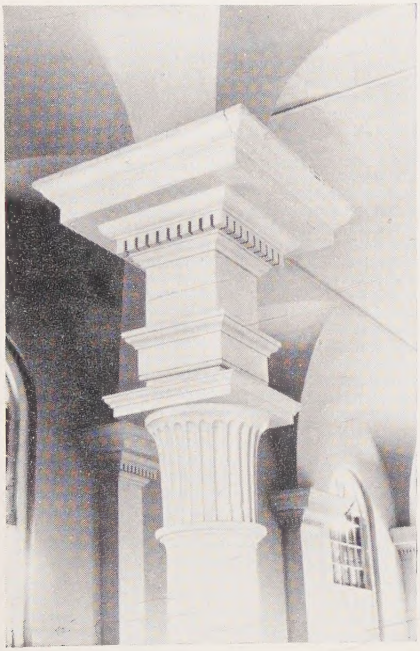
A few years ago there appeared in *Old Time New England*, in the issue of January 1940, an article on the restoration of the Bennington, Vermont, meetinghouse. The author, Rev. Vincent Ravi Booth, told how the design of that church had been credited to Asher Benjamin, but that he had found in the church records the information that the meetinghouse had been designed by Lavius Fillmore, a native of Norwich, Connecticut. The pictures accompanying this article seemed very familiar to the writer, who had never been to Bennington, and were finally recognized as being identical with the interior of the East Haddam meetinghouse, which had been visited shortly before. Curiosity was aroused as to the reason for this resemblance, with the result that four churches were found which had been built from the same plans. The dimensions varied and the steeples were all different. However, inside, each had the unusual feature for that day of a shallow-domed ceiling with groined arches over the galleries which were supported by columns with unusual capitals. These four structures were Bennington and Middlebury in Vermont, and Norwich and East Haddam in Connecticut. It is definitely known that the two Vermont churches were by Fillmore. His success in Bennington caused his selection to build the meetinghouse in his home town, Middlebury. Although he was called "an architect of repute" in the town history, little is known of his work. The only other building attributed to him is the Monroe-Hawkins house, in South Shaftsbury, Vermont.

Unfortunately, the interior of the Norwich meetinghouse could not have pleased the congregation, for in 1845, only forty-one years after it was built, the entire interior was torn out, "including the walls," and a new interior installed. This also failed to suit, and the present finish was put in at a still later date. Miss Caulkins, in her history of Norwich, gives Joseph Terry, of Hartford, as the architect. The church records mention that a contract had been entered into, for the building of the church, with Fillmore and Terry. No other reason for giving Terry the credit for the plans has been found.

We now come to the East Haddam meetinghouse. The church records show that in 1791 the society voted to accept "the plan Captain Elijah Ackley has presented." The records do not show whether he was acting as a committee or as architect.

The suggestion that Fillmore was the architect of all four of these buildings was doubted by almost everybody. The first theory was that the plans were taken from Asher Benjamin's books on architecture, which were used freely by builders of that period. However, these particular plans are not copies of anything in Benjamin, and the East Haddam plans were prepared in 1791 while Benjamin's first book did not appear until 1798.

The late J. Frederick Kelly, the acknowledged authority on Connecticut church architecture, was one who accepted originally the Spratt tradition and for various reasons ruled out the Fillmore theory. However, in March 1940, he came across a photograph he had taken of a column capital at East Haddam, and wrote: "The column capitals used in East Haddam, are of very unusual form —if not unique in Connecticut, and belong to no typical order but they are exactly the same as those in the Bennington meetinghouse! . . . The capitals are identical. This cannot be mere happenstance, as I see it. If we attribute the design of East Haddam to Fillmore, this will account for your letter 'F' cut in the stonework. Besides this, there are several points of strong similarity of design between Bennington, Norwich and East Haddam; enough to make out quite a case."



The capital "F" referred to is cut on the stone step of the East Haddam meetinghouse beside the noonmark. If this is not Fillmore's signature, for what does it stand?

Lavius Fillmore was born in Norwich, Connecticut, in 1767. Bennington accounts state that he moved to Middlebury in 1796, and one of his children was born there, in that year. Swift's history of Middlebury states the date of his arrival there as 1806, the year after he built the Bennington meetinghouse. He was one of several of his name who joined the Connecticut settlers in Vermont. After building the Middlebury meetinghouse, he resided in that town until the end of his life, and, although described as "an architect of repute" in the town history, he engaged in business activities rather than architecture. He was particularly active in Masonry and was Master of Union Lodge, A. F. & A. M. in 1815, 1816, 1823, 1824, and continuously from 1830 to 1846 inclusive. During this latter period, the Lodge was inactive because of Antimasonic agitation, but "he preserved the spark of life and through his efforts it was revived and still carries on." In gratitude, Union Lodge has assumed perpetual care of his grave in the cemetery in nearby New Haven, Vermont." He died about the middle of the century.

Fillmore's age gives the greatest reason to doubt his authorship of the East Haddam plans. He was only twenty-five when the meetinghouse was built. Could he have produced the plans for such a structure at that age without any known architectural training? In any case, he must have had an intimate part in it, for he was able to produce the detailed plans in order to reproduce the structure in Bennington with only those changes due to the change in size. To redraw the intricate curves of the groined ceiling to fit the new dimensions was in itself a task for a draftsman with considerable skill. We do know that he was responsible for two of these churches and we lack the name of any other architect who might have designed the others.

We have not brought into this discussion another puzzle which is also the result of local tradition. Soon after the one-hundredth anniversary of the East Haddam meetinghouse, Mr. T. F. Green, of Washington, D. C., wrote to the *Connecticut Valley Advertiser*, in 1894, and stated that the East Haddam building was copied from one in Stanstead, Quebec, which he had seen, and that "in their outward appearance are as near alike as two peas". So far, efforts to get information from Stanstead have not met with success. Letters have not been answered nor have they been returned. The history of Stanstead makes us doubt that the East Haddam church was a copy of Stanstead, although the reverse may have been true. Stanstead was not settled until ten years after the East Haddam church was built and the Congregational Church did not build a meetinghouse until some years after that. The history also speaks of the meetinghouse as being of brick. It seems entirely possible that Stanstead, a community in Canada just over the Vermont line, with many settlers who had moved over from Vermont, should have copied its church from one of the buildings which Fillmore had built and very possibly engaged him to construct it. If these churches cannot be entirely attributed to him in their design, the Bennington information has, at least, brought to light the name of an able and gifted architect-builder from Connecticut.

JOHN FITCH AND THE STEAMBOAT

An interesting and perhaps important print was recently found showing two views of John Fitch's steamboat. The title is:

ORIGIN OF STEAM NAVIGATION./ "HONOR TO WHOM HONOR IS DUE."/ A VIEW OF COLLECT POND AND ITS VICINITY,/ IN THE CITY OF NEW YORK IN 1793./// BY JOHN HUTCHINGS. NO. 3, WESLEY PLACE, WILLIAMSBURGH, L. ISLAND. 1846. *Drawn & Lith. By J. Penniman; 80½ Canal St. N. Y. F. Michelin's Lith., 111 Nassau St.* 19¼ x 23¾ inches.

In the center is a colored map of Collect Pond, the upper left and right are pictures of the steamboat, under which is the following text:

> John Fitch of Conn. First we find him a farmers boy, next an apprentice to a Watch-maker, then in a store at Trenton, N. J. with a stock valued at 3000 dollˢ all of which was destroyed when the British took Trenton, next a Lieutenant in the A. Army, taken prisoner by the Indians,

and sold from one tribe to another through the N. W. Territory, until he was purchased by an Englishman and thus obtained his freedom. During this time he became acquainted with that part of the country of which he made a map, and although printed on a common Ciderpress, it had an extensive sale. He was then a surveyor in Kentucky, then a Civil Engineer in P[a], and on the Delaware made his first experiment of Steam Boat with Paddles, he then left America, and traveled through France and England, but not meetting with the encouragement anticipated, became poor and returned home, working his passage as a common sailor to Boston, from there to his native town in Connecticut, thence to New York, where he remained some time, then back to Kentucky, where he died.

REMARKS. In the Summer of 1796 or 7, M[r] Hutchings, then a lad, assisted M[r] Fitch in steering the boat, and otherwise attending to the working of the Machinery. At that time Robert R. Livingston Esq. and Robert Fulton with M[r] Fitch and the lad Hutchings, worked, or passed several times around the pond on different occasions, while M[r] Fitch explained to Livingston & Fulton the Modus Operandi of the Machinery. M[r] Fitch having a patent for his invention from the State of N. Y.—I believe M[r] J. Fitch to have been the original inventor of the application of steam to boats as a propelling power, and likewise, the two persons represented in the drawing—(dressed in black) to have been Robert R. Livingston Esq. and Robert Fulton. I being a lad had conversation only with M[r] Fitch. From hearsay, I believe Colonel Stevens of Hoboken, N. Jersey, and another person by the name of Rosevelt* had some knowledge of the enterprize and felt an interest in its success. In conversation M[r] Fitch remarked to M[r] Fulton, that in a former experiment paddle wheels splashed too much, and could not be used in Canal Navigation. No one in that time, thought of having them covered with boxes. They had no doubt, but the boat might be propelled 6 Miles per hour, (though then making something less.) The steam was sufficiently high to propel the boat once, twice or thrice around the pond, when more water being introduced into the boiler (or pot) and Steam generated She was again ready to start on another expedition—

DESCRIPTION. The boat was a common long boat, or Yawl, about 18 ft. lenght and 6 ft. beam, with square stern, and round bows, with seats. She was steared at the bow with small oar when the propeller was used.

The boiler was a 10 or 12 gallon iron pot, with a lid of thick plank firmly fastened to it by an iron bar, placed transversly. The Cylinders were of wood, barrel shaped on the outside and straight on the inside, strongly hooped. The main steam pipe led directly from the boiler top into a copper box (about 6 inches square) or receiver, or valve box. The leading pipes led seperately into the bottom or base. (The one short cylinder F and longer one E) seperate cylinders and each piston rod was attached to the extremities of the working beam. This beam was sup-

*Nicholas J. Rosevelt Esq. now residing near Skaneateles Lake in this State.

ported by an iron upright, the connecting rod was so arranged as to turn the crank of the propelling shaft which passed horrizontally through the stern of the boat and was made fast to the propeller or screw as at L. The valves were worked by a simple contrivance attached likewise to the working beam as will be easily seen and understood by refference to the attached perspective drawings—

The boat, together with a portion of its machinery was abandoned, by Mr Fitch, and left to decay on the muddy shore of the Collect Pond and was carried away piece by piece by the children of the neighbourhood for fuel. In the Autumn Mr Fitch left New York for Kentucky, being forced to go by his pecuniary and domestic troubles. Having made his last successfull effort, to succeed in this glorious enterprise of Steam Navigation.

John Fitch died in Kentucky in the year 1798, and if he or R. Fulton had written their own history, I have no doubt, either one or both of them would have left some account of the transaction as related here by me, but finding no account of it in the history of either, I have given as exact an account of it as I possibly can. Having often spoken of it, I do believe my memory to be perfectly correct. If his country had furnished J. Fitch the means, we should have been blessd with Steam Navigation, ten or fifteen years sooner than we were—

John Hutchings

Apparently more than one hundred years ago efforts were made to give John Fitch his proper place in the development of the steamboat. So far we have located no reproduction identical to ours and since its author was an assistant during the successful trial on Collect Pond, his testimony and design should be of particular significance.

NEWS OF THE SOCIETY

Dr. Ernest R. Caulfield, well known authority of early children's diseases, is now conducting research on multiple births in New England. He is particularly interested in triplets and quadruplets and would appreciate information on their occurrence prior to 1775. This may be sent to him care of the Society.

We have recently had 61 Kodachrome slides made of our choicest museum specimens. These include some furniture, silver, guns, prints and paintings. This is only a nucleus of what can be done and we hope from time to time funds will be available to add to the collection. These slides are now available for showing to interested groups and as the collection grows, there will be sufficient material for a number of different talks based upon objects in this museum. Contributions to a fund for this purpose will be welcomed.

The Price of these Bulletins is ten cents each.